

**Abstract.** *In recent years, materialism has become an increasingly important topic in consumer behaviour and marketing. However, several scholars have questioned the existing materialism conceptualizations, by extension the various materialism measures. In this paper, materialism literature is reviewed extensively. This conceptual paper comprises of four sections. First, materialism is discussed as a socio-cultural phenomenon as well as an individual phenomenon. Second, materialism as an individual phenomenon based on Larsen et al. (1999) conceptual framework is discussed. Third, various materialism conceptualizations in consumer behaviour and marketing literature have been reviewed. Furthermore, ten different materialism measurement scales were discussed. Also, their drawbacks are mentioned. Based on the review, it is concluded that existing materialism conceptualizations and measures have several shortcomings. Consequently, in the fourth part, a newer materialism conceptualization proposed by Shrum et al. (2012) is discussed. Additionally, the advantages of the newer definition of materialism over prevailing definitions are explained.*

**Keywords:** materialism, perspectives, conceptualizations in consumer behaviour, marketing measurement scales, drawbacks.

## **MATERIALISM IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND MARKETING: A REVIEW**

**Manchiraju SRIKANT**

*Iowa State University*

*Ames, Iowa, USA*

*e-mail: srikant@iastate.edu*

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## 1. Introduction

One particular aspect related to consumption that has gained widespread attention is – *materialism*. Materialism is defined as “*the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions*” (Belk, 1984, p. 291). Noting the importance of materialism, Twitchell (1999) maintained, “[*o*ff the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s various – isms, it has been the one that has ultimately triumphed” (p. 16). Indeed, the Association of Consumer Research has sponsored a conference devoted to materialism (Rudmin and Richins, 1992), which further corroborates the importance of the topic for consumer behavior researchers and marketers. However, scholars (e.g., Larsen et al., 1999) have noted that the existing conceptualizations and by extension, materialism measurement scales, have several drawbacks.

Given the importance of the topic, materialism literature is reviewed extensively. First, a discussion follows about materialism and its various perspectives. Second, a discussion continues on materialism conceptualizations in the field of consumer behavior and marketing. Additionally, ten different measurement scales related to materialism are explained along with their drawbacks. Third, consequences related to materialism at individual as well as societal levels are reviewed. Finally, a new conceptualization of materialism proposed by Shrum et al. (2012) is introduced to explain the conceptual advantages of this definition over prevailing conceptualizations.

Meaning of the word “materialism” is rooted in philosophy (Micken and Roberts, 1999), which refers to the philosophical conceptualization that nothing exists except matter and its movement (Scott, 2009). In his book, *The History of Materialism*, Lange (1873-75, p. 215) noted the then prevalent notion about materialism, as a belief in “*material, self-existent things*.” Today, in common usage, materialism is associated with a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012).

Materialism is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon (Larsen et al., 1999), extensively studied by scholars from various fields, such as advertising, anthropology, consumer behavior and marketing, economics, psychology, political science, and social sciences (Mannion and Caolan, 1995). Accordingly, materialism has been viewed from socio-cultural as well as individual perspectives (Hunt et al., 1996). Also, it has been noted that materialism has different connotations: negative (e.g., Micken and Roberts, 1999), positive (e.g., Scott, 2009), and neutral (e.g., Larsen et al., 1999). All the issues mentioned will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Richins and Dawson (1992) noted the term “materialism” is used freely and loosely. Consistently, the concept of materialism has been approached from different perspectives. The following paragraphs explain two broad perspectives, namely socio-cultural perspective and individual perspective. Also, it is important to note that while these perspectives are explained, materialism is conceptualized as a neutral concept.

### **1.1. Materialism: a socio-cultural perspective**

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, materialism refers to cultures in which the majority of the people in the society value material objects highly (Larsen et al., 1999). For example, the United States has been viewed as a highly materialistic society, more so than any other part of the world (Belk and Pollay, 1985). Furthermore, as noted at a societal level, materialism is on the rise in the United States and globally (Ghadrian, 2010). Pollay (1992) notes that some historians (e.g., Schlesinger, 1986) maintain that materialism is a socio-cultural phenomenon, which repeats in thirty-year cycles and oscillates between materialism (e.g., the Eisenhower years, materialism of the 1980s) and altruism (e.g., the New Deal era of 1930s). Several antecedents for prevalence of materialistic socio-cultural phenomenon have been proposed, which include advertising (e.g., Schor and Holt, 2000), politics (e.g., Inglehart, 1990), and social structure (e.g., Punetha et al., 1987). A detailed discussion related to materialism as a socio-cultural phenomenon can be found elsewhere (e.g., Ghadrian, 2010; Schor and Holt, 2000).

### **1.2. Materialism: an individual perspective**

As an individual phenomenon, materialism refers to label a person who values material objects highly (Larsen et al., 1999). In other words, individuals who value materialism pursue material possessions and the accumulation of income and wealth (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Like materialism as a socio-cultural phenomenon, individual materialism is on the rise (Lim et al., 2012). For example, Myers (2012) mentioned a study conducted by the UCLA/American Council of Education that surveyed a quarter million collegians; the proportion of individuals who expressed financial success as very important to them grew from 39 percent in 1970 to 78 percent in 2009. Several antecedents of individual materialism have been proposed, which include wealth, childhood socialization, and individual's uncertainty feelings (see Chang and Arkin, 2002; Kasser, 2002). Noting the works of Talcott Parson (*The Structure of Social Action*, 1937; *Towards a General Theory of Action*, 1951), Hier (2005, p. 9) mentioned, “[t]he behavior of individual actors has meaning in terms of motivations and orientations that take the form of social roles and cultural expectations.” Consequently, in the discussion that follows related to materialism, the term “materialism” is employed in the broadest possible manner.

## **2. Materialism: four perspectives**

Larsen et al. (1999, p. 83) noted “there is no integrated theory of materialism; ideas about the causes of materialism may be derived from a wide variety of theoretical and ethical perspectives.” Consequently, scholars have proposed conceptual framework for materialism. In the present study, Larsen et al.'s (1999)

four perspectives on materialism framework are discussed. This framework employs a 2 x 2 matrix, based on materialism’s antecedents (innate/learned) and consequences (good/bad). The four perspectives on materialism framework are depicted in Figure 1.

	Innate	Learned
Good	Epicurean Perspective	Bourgeois Perspective
Bad	Religious Perspective	Critical Perspective

Source: (Larsen et al., 1999, p. 79).

Figure 1. Four perspectives on materialism framework

Before explaining the framework, this paper digresses. Earlier, it was noted the term “materialism” has negative as well as positive connotations. Accordingly, scholars have defined materialism, with an implicit (negative or positive) connotation. The following paragraphs briefly address this issue.

Researchers (e.g., Larsen et al., 1999; Scott, 2009) have noted this is the dominant conceptualization in materialism research. Furthermore, Swagler (1994) noted materialism has a negative connotation among the general public. Accordingly, scholars have conceptualized materialism with a negative undertone, consistent with a “*self-imposed societal mandate*” (Mannion and Brannick, 1995, p. 1). Mukerji (1993) defined materialism as “*a general lust for goods*” (cited in Mannion and Brannick, 1995, p. 2). Belk (1985, p. 266) defined materialism as the “*importance a person attaches to worldly possessions.*”

In other words, Scott (2009) noted materialism entails an individual’s preference towards material objects over spiritual values; hence, a negative meaning is ascribed to it. Twitchell (1999, pp. 24-25) summarized the prevalent negative notion related to materialism and stated materialism “*is wasteful, it is devoid of otherworldly concerns, it lives for today and celebrates the body, and it overindulges and spoils the young with impossible promises.*” In fact, at a cultural level, the widespread prevalence of materialism has been labeled as *affluenza* (Windisch and MacDermott, 2009) defined as, “*the collective addictions, character flaws, psychological wounds, neuroses, and behavioral disorders caused or greatly exacerbated by the presence of, or desire for excess material objects or money or wealth*” (O’Neill, 1997 cited in Windisch and MacDermott, 2009, p. 16).

Several researchers (e.g., Scott, 2009) have noted the importance of materialism. Ward and Wackman (1971) defined materialism as “*an orientation emphasizing possession and money for personal happiness and social progress*” (p. 426). Similarly, Larsen et al. noted Taschian et al.’s (1984) conceptualized materialism

positively in their study related to energy use and conservation. For example, their materialism conceptualization included dimensions, such as growth in material consumption helps raise the level of civilization and material growth makes for happier living (Larsen et al., 1999).

Several scholars (e.g., Twitchell, 1999) have opined materialism is beneficial. Evolution-based theories (e.g., Buss, 1989) have noted the importance of materialism, by maintaining that the pursuit of wealth and social status is built in our genes. Adam Smith (1776/1977), the economist, noted that under certain conditions, the actions of rational and self-interested humans seeking happiness can promote general good. In support of materialism, Twitchell (1999) noted “*most of us have more pleasure and less discomfort in our lives than most of the people most of the time in all of history*” (p. 19).

### **2.1. Materialism: innate and good**

According to this perspective, materialism is an innate quality, which is good (Larsen et al., 1999). Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher, endorsed this perspective. Larsen et al. (1999) noted that Epicurus believed immediate sensations of pain and pleasure were the only real things. Furthermore, Epicurus noted this hedonistic perspective was salutary and did not imply animalistic behavior (ibidem). This perspective has been endorsed by economists (e.g., Bentham, 1789/1996) and psychologists (e.g., Freud, 1961).

For example, Hedonism theory refers to having material objects or experiences that help an individual attain pleasure (Waterman et al., 2008). This perspective is rooted in Jeremy Bentham’s concept of utilitarianism (Waterman et al., 2008). Bentham stated, “[n]ature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure” (1789/1996, p. 11). Similarly, in his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud proposed a materialistic understanding of purpose of human life in relation to the pleasure principle, he noted that “*what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle*” (p. 25), which “*dominates the operation of the mental apparatus from the start*” (p. 25). Likewise, from an evolutionary perspective, human preference for material objects originates from a universal tendency to signal traits that might increase status (e.g., costly signaling theory, Nelissen and Meijers, 2011).

### **2.2. Materialism: innate and bad**

Materialism, as innate and bad, is a dominant perspective held by various religions (Larsen et al., 1999). Larsen et al. noted the religious perspective holds that human beings are born corrupt or fallen, with an unholy and unreasonable desire to amass things. For example, in Hinduism, *Kama* (Sanskrit: desire) is considered to be one of the four basic aims—satisfied, restricted, or transcended during one’s life (Ghadrian, 2010). In Confucianism, striving for wealth and power is considered less significant than striving for virtue (ibidem). In Sufism, it is proposed that all existence

in the world is superfluous, except union with God as a spiritual quest (ibidem). Similar teachings have been proposed by various other religions (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism; see Ghadrian, 2010). In short, the religious perspective on materialism is negative, since it entails an individual's preoccupation with materialistic desires and impedes one's spiritual growth (ibidem).

Russell Belk is considered the most influential contributor in materialism research (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Larsen et al. (1999) noted that Belk employed positivistic and interpretivistic approaches in materialism research. However, Belk's positivistic approach is considered to endorse this perspective (cf. Larsen et al., 1999). For example, Belk (1985) proposed that materialism is a personality trait. Belk noted envy is one such concept that underlies materialistic personality trait. However, envy theorists (Ninivaggi, 2010, p. 3) noted envy (especially, nuclear envy in envy theory) as "*an innately endowed predisposition.*" In Freudian psychology, which Belk (1985) used in conceptualization of envy construct, envy is regarded as innate and primarily a bad trait (e.g., Rosenfeld, 1959).

### **2.3. Materialism: acquired and good**

The Bourgeoisie perspective endorses materialism as acquired and good. The term "Bourgeoisie" refers to members of the middle class (Merriam-Webster, 2012). According to this perspective, Larsen et al. (1999) noted that materialism is not innate, but acquired through cultural teachings. This view is consistent with opinions expressed by Tooby and Cosmides (1992). According to them, human organisms are inherently empty and materialism acquires meaning in accord with social and cultural teachings (see also Deci and Ryan, 2008). It is considered good because materialism contributes to personal fulfillment and betterment of society, in general (Twitchell, 1999).

In his article, *Two Cheers for Materialism*, Twitchell (1999) noted several positive aspects related to materialism, which entail social progress. For example, in the U.S., the average new house today is twice as large as the average house built during the early years after World War II. In *Pursuing Happiness* (1993), Lebergott noted that most Americans have "*spent their way to happiness*" (cited in Twitchell, 1999, p. 19). Twitchell explained what Lebergott was implying; although, consumption by the rich has remained relatively steady, the other members of society (e.g., Bourgeoisie) have a chance to pursue "*the American Dream*". Money may not buy happiness, as several scholars have argued, "*[b]ut you stand a better chance than with penury*" (Twitchell, 1999, p. 20).

### **2.4. Materialism: acquired and bad**

Consistent with the Bourgeoisie perspective, this perspective views materialism as acquired. However, the critical perspective views materialism as bad. According to this view, consumers of capitalistic societies are constantly bombarded

by messages (e.g., advertisements) that foster false beliefs that happiness is attainable through acquisition of material objects (e.g., Schor and Holt, 2000). In his book, *The Affluent Society* (1958), John Kenneth Galbraith posed questions related to compatibility of production and consumption in a capitalist society. In particular, how the relationship between endless production and consumption could be sustained? Schor and Holt (2000, p. xi) noted Galbraith's answer—dependence effect, which is "*the institutions of advertising and salesmanship...create desires*". In other words, Schor and Holt noted that corporations create consumer wants and satisfy them. Thus, compatibility is ensured, where corporations control both sides of the market.

Several scholars have noted the bad (i.e., negative) consequences of materialism. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) noticed that in an organizational context managers perceived as being pressurized for being successful (i.e., incur profit), are more likely to exhibit unethical behaviors. Likewise, Muncy and Eastman (1998) found that materialistic individuals are more likely to exhibit unethical consumer behaviors (e.g., use of deceptive practices in the buying process by the consumer). Richins and Dawson (1992) noted that for a materialistic person, possessions become the focus of one's life, which takes precedence over religion, friends, and other achievements.

### **3. Materialism in marketing**

This paper is conceptually-focused, in that, it explores various materialism conceptualizations and measurement scales, which are widely employed in consumer behavior and marketing studies. Consistently, in this section: (1) materialism perspectives in marketing and (2) materialism measurement scales used in marketing, are discussed. This section has been compiled based on extensive literature review, which included seminal works in materialism (e.g., Richins and Dawson, 1992) and gray literature (e.g., Scott, 2009).

#### **3.1. Materialism: Perspectives in marketing**

In marketing, the concept of materialism has received widespread attention (e.g., Larsen et al., 1999). Understanding materialism is important to consumer researchers and marketers for two contradictory reasons: (1) to promote materialism, which increases a society's economic wealth and material possessions and (2) to understand the negative consequences related to materialism (e.g., consumer ethics) (Muncy and Eastman, 1998).

Richins and Dawson (1992) noted that understanding materialism at a cultural level is useful; nevertheless, examining individual differences in materialism can provide greater insight. At an individual level, various scholars have conceptualized materialism differently (Shrum et al., 2012). Materialism has been conceptualized as an attitude, belief, lifestyle, state (i.e., mood), trait, and value (e.g., Ahuvia, 2008;

Belk, 1985; Chang and Arkin, 2002; Richins and Dawson, 1992). In empirical marketing research, several instruments have been developed to measure materialism at an individual level, based on the aforementioned conceptualizations.

This section briefly reviews ten materialism scales. Furthermore, the drawbacks related to each scale are explained. It is important to note the materialism scales mentioned below have contributed greatly to the understanding related to materialism (e.g., Shrum et al., 2012).

### *3.1.1. Personality materialism (Belk, 1985)*

Belk's materialism scale is one of the widely used instruments to measure materialism (Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Belk (1985) viewed materialism as a function of an individual's personality traits. According to Belk, there are three dominant traits that govern materialism—envy, nongenerosity, and possessiveness. Envy refers to an individual's strong desire for others' possessions. Ahuvia and Wong (1995) noted, "[t]he envious person resents those who own what he wants" (p. 172). Nongenerosity is defined as an aversion an individual entertains regarding giving or sharing of one's possessions. Nongenerosity gives rise to a reluctance to donate one's possessions and the fostering of a negative attitude towards charity (Ahuvia and Wong, 1995). Possessiveness is defined as the great concern an individual displays towards one's possessions. However, Ger and Belk (1996) added a fourth trait—preservation. Preservation refers to a tendency to make one's experiences tangible (e.g., souvenirs).

Several drawbacks related to Belk's materialism scale have been noted. They include negative a priori expectations and poor reliability (Larsen et al., 1999). For example, scholars (e.g., Shrum et al., 2012) have noted that Belk conceptualized materialism with a priori negative expectations, by including negative traits, such as envy and non-generosity. Shrum et al. (2012, p. 5) noted such negative pre-conceptualization of materialism "*precludes any investigation into functions of materialism that may not be detrimental.*" Several scholars (e.g., Cole et al., 1992) have noted the poor validity and reliability related to Belk's measure. Scott (2009) noted Belk's studies and mentioned the coefficient alpha for the entire scale ranged from .66 to .73. Cole et al. (1992) tested the validity and reliability of Belk's (1985) scale. They failed to replicate Belk's three-factor structure. Furthermore, the coefficient alpha for the overall scale reported by them was .54. Richins and Dawson (1992) noted Belk's (1985) scale suffered from inadequate reliability, with the coefficient alpha ranging from .09 to .81 and median value is .54.

### *3.1.2. Value materialism (Richins and Dawson, 1992)*

Richin and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale is the most widely used instrument to measure individual materialism (Shrum et al., 2012). Richins (1994) explained materialism as a value. A value, as defined by Rokeach (1973, p. 161), is "*a centrally held, enduring belief which guides actions and judgments across specific*



*situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states of existence*". Accordingly, Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 308) define materialism as a "set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life". According to Richins and Dawson, the three dominant values in the context of materialism are acquisition centrality, happiness, and success. Acquisition centrality is the importance materialists attach to possessions and the acquisition of material goods central to their lives. Happiness refers to the belief that owning the desirable possessions entails well-being. Success refers to a belief that an individual's success is dependent upon an individual's possession of material goods. Richins and Dawson (1992) reported the coefficient alpha for their 18-item scale was .80. It is important to note other variations of Richins and Dawson (1992) scale exist (e.g., state materialism scale, Chang and Arkin, 2002; need for material resources scale, Mowen, 2000; see also Richins, 1987, 2004).

Several drawbacks related to Richins scale have been noted. For example, Larsen et al. (1999) noted Richins' materialism scale was developed with an implicit assumption that materialism entails negative emotions; whereas, a lack of materialism entails positive emotions. Also, low reliability issues related to Richins' scale have been observed (e.g., Scott, 2009). Shrum et al. (2012) noted Richins' conceptualized materialism as stable and immune to manipulation. But, Chang and Arkin (2002) demonstrated that Richins' materialism scale is susceptible to manipulation.

### *3.1.3. Aspiration index (Kasser and Ryan, 1996)*

Kasser and Ryan (1996) developed an aspiration index widely used in materialism research (Scott, 2009). Their aspiration index is a revised version of the scale initially proposed by Kasser and Ryan (1993). From the aspiration index perspective, materialism is viewed as a function of intrinsic and extrinsic goals (Kasser, 2002). Intrinsic goals (e.g., self-acceptance, physical fitness, Schmuck et al., 2000) refer to goals inherently satisfying to pursue, since they are likely to satisfy innate psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness; see self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic goals (e.g., money, fame) refer to goals contingent upon external approval or rewards (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Schmuck et al. (2000) noted individuals pursue extrinsic goals to tackle their insecurities; thus, involve in pursuit of goals that are stressful, ego-involved, and controlled behavior. According to this perspective, materialistic individuals are driven by extrinsic goal pursuits, such as financial success, social recognition, and appealing appearance (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996).

Drawbacks related to the aspiration index have been noted by several scholars (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2000). For example, the aspiration index clearly defines intrinsic and extrinsic goals. However, Schmuck et al. (2000) conducted a cross-cultural study using the aspiration index and found that a clear factor(s) structure (especially for intrinsic goals) did not emerge in the German sample, unlike the sample drawn from the United States. For instance, Schmuck et al. (2000) noted that

physical fitness, which has been classified as an intrinsic goal (Kasser and Ryan, 1996) also cross-loaded on an extrinsic goal factor. Consequently, Schmuck et al. (2000, p. 236) concluded that “*the results were somewhat suggestive that the intrinsic goal of physical fitness may be more distinct from other intrinsic goals*”. Furthermore, Deci and Ryan (2000) noted a clear distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic goals cannot be easily drawn. The self-determination theory proposed “*internalization is an active, natural process in which individuals attempt to transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulations*” (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 236; see also Carver and Baird, 1998). In other words, individuals assimilate and reconstitute external regulations, such that individuals are self-determined, while enacting their goals (Deci and Ryan, 2000). For instance, Shrum et al. (2012) noted that financial success can be intrinsic, if the underlying motives are based on competence and self-determination.

### *3.1.4. Terminal vs. instrumental materialism (Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Scott, 2009)*

Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) noted that materialism is neither good nor bad, but depending on the purpose of the consumption they identified two types of materialism: instrumental materialism and terminal materialism. Instrumental materialism refers to acquisition and possessions of material objects that have the potential to enhance individuals’ goals related to safety, longevity, and happiness (Scott, 2009). Conversely, terminal materialism refers to acquisition and possessions of material objects for their own sake (Shrum et al., 2012). Scott (2009) noted instrumental materialism is harmless; whereas, terminal materialism is harmful for an individual. Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton did not develop a measurement scale. However, recently, Scott (2009) developed a scale to measure instrumental and terminal materialism, based on an evolutionary perspective.

Several scholars (e.g., Richins and Dawson, 1992) have criticized Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s (1981) materialism conceptualization. For example, Richins and Dawson (1992) noted terminal materialism refers to acquisition and possession of material objects by individuals for their own sake. However, the examples provided by the authors for terminal materialism were inconsistent with their conceptualization. Scott (2009) noted that terminal materialism entails possession of material objects to control one’s status. In other words, acquisition and possession of material goods is not the ultimate goal, as conceptualized by terminal materialism. But, terminal materialism is a means to achieve other goals (e.g., envy by others, Shrum et al., 2012).

### *3.1.5. Inglehart’s materialism scale (Inglehart, 1981)*

The political scientist, Ronald Inglehart, proposed a measurement scale widely used in materialism research (Scott, 2009). The measurement scale developed

by Inglehart (1981) is based on his theory of materialistic socialization. The central proposition of Inglehart's theory is that adult materialism is intertwined with formative feelings of economic insecurity (Inglehart, 1990). According to Inglehart, economic development entails gradual changes in value priorities of the public in advanced industrial societies. It has been proposed that, as survival becomes secure, materialistic importance on economic and physical security diminishes, and the public's value emphasis shifts to post-materialist values, such as freedom, self-expression, and the quality of life (Inglehart and Abramson, 1999). Accordingly, Inglehart's scale consisted of items, which reflect materialistic values (e.g., stable economy, control of inflation) and post-materialistic values (e.g., freedom of expression, more beautiful cities) (Inglehart, 1981). In consumer behavior and marketing research, there is evidence that Inglehart's conceptualization of materialism is related to materialism as conceptualized by Belk (1985) and Richins and Dawson (1992) (e.g., Ahuvia and Wong, 2002).

Problems related to Inglehart's materialism scale have been addressed (e.g., Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Ahuvia and Wong (2002) posed that Inglehart's materialism definition is broader than what is usually defined in consumer psychology. Consistently, Scott (2009) noted Inglehart's scale measures materialism at a societal-level rather than individual-level. Consequently, it is not related to individual materialism, which influences consumers' activities and choices (Scott, 2009). Richins and Dawson (1992, pp. 306-307) noted, "[t]his approach does not directly measure the complex, multidimensional nature of materialism and... does not assess individual differences in the strength of material values."

#### *3.1.6. Moschis and Churchill's materialism scale (Moschis and Churchill, 1978)*

Moschis and Churchill (1978) first introduced the concept of materialism in empirical market research (cf. Belk, 1983; Richins and Dawson, 1992). Moschis and Churchill (1978, p. 607) defined materialism as, "*an orientation emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress.*" It is important to underline that the focal topic of their study was to understand adolescent consumer socialization, which included understanding materialism. Consequently, to measure materialism, they proposed a six-item scale. The use of this scale has primarily been in the context of adolescent materialism (e.g., Parker et al., 2004), although, the modified version of the scale has been used in some adult materialism studies (e.g., Lui et al., 2012).

Related to Moschis and Churchill's materialism scale, several scholars have identified its drawbacks. For example, Larsen et al. (1999) noted that Moschis and Churchill's scale demonstrated poor reliability. In fact, Moschis and Churchill (1978) reported a low reliability ( $\alpha = .60$ ) for their materialism scale. Similarly, Lui et al. (2012), who employed the modified version of Moschis and Churchill's scale, reported low scale reliability ( $\alpha = .60$ ). At a conceptual level, scholars (e.g., Richins

and Dawson, 1992) maintained that Moschis and Churchill's materialism scale measures an individual's attitude towards materialism rather than individual's materialism.

### *3.1.7. Money attitude scale (Yamauchi and Templer, 1982)*

Yamauchi and Templer (1982) developed the money attitude scale, an example of materialism measure (Larsen et al., 1999). Larsen et al.'s (1999) proposition is consistent with other scholars' conceptualization of materialism (e.g., Tatzel, 2003). For example, Kasser and Ryan (1993) attributed the pursuit of financial success is related to materialism. Tatzel (2003) noted the pursuit of money is related to financial aspirations. Consequently, Yamauchi and Templer (1982) developed a 29-item money attitude scale, which captures four underlying factors: (1) distrust/anxiety (i.e., suspicion about overpaying/worrying about not having enough money), (2) retention/time (i.e., tracking money and budgeting), (3) power/prestige (i.e., pursuing of money because it entails positive social consequences), and (4) quality (i.e., wanting to pay more to get the best). Over the years, several variations of the money attitude scale have been developed (e.g., Lim and Teo, 1997). Furthermore, it has been observed that money attitude and individual materialism are related, and a model has been proposed with money attitude and materialism as two dimensions that determine an individual's buying pattern (see Tatzel, 2003).

The drawback related to the money attitude scale is its narrow conceptualization. As noted earlier, materialism entails the pursuit of possession and wealth. However, conceptualizing materialism as an attitude towards money, constrains materialism conceptualization severely.

### *3.1.8. Youth materialism scale (Goldberg et al., 2003)*

Goldberg et al. (2003) developed the youth materialism scale. Bottomley et al. (2010) noted the majority of materialism research has focused on adult materialism rather than on children or adolescents. Furthermore, Bottomley et al. (2010) questioned the validity of using adult materialism scales (e.g., Belk, 1985) in the context of understanding children and youth materialism. For example, they noted, "if Belk's personality materialism scale is used, at what age a child's personality is sufficiently formed that is sensible to measure materialism with this scale?" (Bottomley et al., 2010, p. 719). Similar sentiment was echoed by Goldberg et al. (2003). Consequently, to understand materialism among children and youth, the youth materialism scale was proposed. Goldberg et al. (2003) mentioned four reasons for developing the youth materialism scale: (1) youth's orientation towards purchasing, (2) youth's responses towards marketing initiatives, (3) marketplace interplay between youths and their parents, and (4) broader issues (e.g., youth's happiness). The youth materialism scale is a 10-item scale, which consists of few items related to Richins

and Dawson (1992) and Belk's (1985) materialism scales. Goldberg et al. (2003) reported .79 coefficient alpha for their scale.

Various scholars (e.g., Bottomley et al., 2010) have noted drawbacks related to the youth materialism scale. For example, Goldberg et al. (2003) noted the youth materialism scale is uni-dimensional. In other words, all 10 items from the scale load on one factor. However, Bottomley et al. (2010) noted the youth materialism scale is a hybrid construct, consisting of items from two different scales that consider materialism as a multi-dimensional construct. Furthermore, Bottomley et al. (2010) contended Goldberg et al. (2003) reported the one-factor structure analysis of their youth materialism scale. However, they failed to report any test related to competing with a multi-factor structure. It is important to note the scale reliability of the youth materialism scale has been reported as satisfactory by several studies. Chaplin and John (2010) studied the role of parents and peers influence on youth materialism. One of the measures used in their study was the youth materialism scale, which demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$ ). In sum, the youth materialism scale has some drawbacks: (1) dimensionality issues (i.e., uni-dimensional vs. multi-dimensional, Bottomley et al., 2010) and (2) scope of its application (i.e., materialism instrument designed only for children and adolescents).

### *3.1.9. Consumer involvement scale (Schor, 2004; Bottomley et al., 2010)*

To understand childhood materialism, Schor (2004) proposed the consumer involvement scale. Bottomley et al. (2010) maintained that to understand childhood materialism, the focus from personality traits (e.g., Belk, 1985) and values (e.g., Richins and Dawson, 1992) needs to be shifted. Instead, the focus must be on their consumption behavior. By consumer involvement, Schor (2005) refers to media's influence on children's behavior, which determines children's participation in consumer culture. Consequently, Schor (2004) developed a 16-item scale. Bottomley et al. (2010) noted that Schor (2004) considered consumer involvement scale to be multi-dimensional; and they provided empirical evidence which supported the multi-dimensional structure proposition of consumer involvement scale. The three dimensions are (1) consumer orientation (e.g., "I want to make a lot of money when I grow up"), (2) dissatisfaction (e.g., "I wish my parents gave me more money to spend"), and (3) brand awareness (e.g., "I like clothes with popular labels"). In general, they demonstrated adequate reliability for the consumer involvement scale ( $\alpha = .57 - .81$ ). Drawbacks related to the consumer involvement scale have been noted. For example, Bottomley et al. (2010) mentioned the sub-factor consumer orientation in the consumer involvement scale demonstrated inadequate reliability. Thus, future research should focus on refinement of this particular sub-construct. Like the youth materialism scale, this scale is applicable to understand children and youths' materialistic behavior.

*3.1.10. Possession satisfaction index scale (Scott and Lundstrom, 1990)*

Scott and Lundstrom (1990) developed a materialism scale to measure an individual's attitude towards money and material objects. The possession satisfaction index scale consists of 20 items, which measure an individual's attitude towards money and material objects. Scott and Lundstrom (1990) noted that an individual's attitude towards money and material objects is related. They stated, "[m]onetary acquisition serves as the means for material acquisition" (p. 103). Consequently, Scott and Lundstrom identified five factors important in the context of an individual's attitude towards money and material objects. They are: (1) what possessions can do, (2) what possessions cannot do, (3) public image, (4) success equal possessions, and (5) money is better. They reported a reliability of .80 for their scale.

This scale has several drawbacks. First, very few studies have employed the possession satisfaction index scale. Second, some scholars have questioned its dimensionality aspect. For example, Evrard and Boff (1998) studied Brazilians' materialism and attitudes towards marketing practices and determined of the 20 items of the possession satisfaction index scale, only 12 items could be retained. The 12 items retained, reflected two factors they labeled as "value expressiveness of wealth" and "wealth importance". They reported reliabilities for the two factors, .67 and .63, respectively. Furthermore, Scott and Lundstrom (1990) noted the scale was developed, based on a small sample (n = 150). Consequently, they proposed further validation of the proposed scale. In sum, the scale proposed by Scott and Lundstrom (1990) has several issues: (1) a dimensionality problem, (2) internal consistency problem, and (3) conceptualization problem (e.g., for empirical evidence demonstrating the difference between Scott and Lundstrom's (1990) scale and Belk's/Richins, and Dawson's materialism scales, see Evrard and Boff, 1998).

In this section, ten materialism scales were discussed. Based on the review, it is evident that most of the materialism scales were developed on a very restrictive definition of materialism. Furthermore, most of the scales discussed have several drawbacks. It is important to note the measurement scales discussed in this preceding section are not exhaustive. Other materialism and related measures have been developed (e.g., Tang, 1995; for a list, see Richins and Dawson, 1992). Despite the drawbacks related to materialism conceptualizations and their measurement scales, materialism research has furthered understanding human behavior (Shrum et al., 2012). Consequently, the following sub-section briefly discusses materialism research findings.

**3.2. Consequences of materialism**

Materialism has important consequences at an individual-level as well as a societal-level (Larsen et al., 1999). In general, the negative consequences related to materialism are well-documented (Scott, 2009). In the following paragraphs, the negative consequences related to materialism are discussed, both at an individual-level as well as a societal-level (for positive consequences, e.g., see Scott, 2009).

Several studies have demonstrated negative individual consequences of materialism. Materialism is positively related to various psychological illnesses (e.g., paranoia and depression; Kasser and Ryan, 1993), conflicts between spouses (Paduska, 1992), tendency to engage in shoplifting (Larsen et al., 1999), more favorable attitude towards borrowing (e.g., excessive use of credit cards) and are less likely to engage in saving money (Watson, 2003). Kasser (2002) reported materialistic adolescents were more likely to engage in negative behaviors, which include alcohol abuse and marijuana abuse.

Not surprisingly, happiness studies focusing on materialism have found a negative relationship between materialism and happiness. For example, Wright and Larsen (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of studies to explore the relationships between materialism and life satisfaction, and found individuals who displayed a materialistic orientation reported a lower level of life satisfaction. Similar findings have been reported by various scholars (for a list, see Larsen and Wright, 1993).

Several scholars have noted negative consequences of materialism at a societal-level. For example, the socio-cultural prevalence of “the myth of materialism” (i.e., the widespread belief that the best way to obtain happiness is by making and spending money; see also the paradox of happiness, Martin, 2008) is partly responsible for the widespread prevalence of depression, loneliness, and shyness (Dill and Anderson, 1999). It has been noted in the modern materialistic U.S. society, loneliness characterizes twenty-six percent of the population at any given point in time (Bradburn, 1969 cited in Dill and Anderson, 1999). Kasser (2002) noted that materialistic values conflict with various concerns, such as making the world a better place, and a desire to contribute to equality and justice. Consequently, Ghadrian (2010) noted materialism is related to deterioration of morality in human societies. He noted the prevalence of materialism contributes towards various societal problems, which include child labor, human trafficking, and forced labor.

Furthermore, scholars have noted materialism, which leads to overconsumption, poses a major impediment for sustainable consumption. For example, Ghadrian (2010) noted twenty percent of the world’s population living in industrialized (also materialistic) countries consumes eighty-six percent of the world’s goods. Additionally, Kasser (2002) noted materialistic societies have lower concerns related to environmental and ecological issues.

#### **4. Redefining materialism**

In this section, the following issues are discussed: (1) the four main drawbacks related to existing materialism conceptualizations and (2) provided a newer definition for materialism, as proposed by Shrum et al. (2012). Additionally, conceptual advantages related to a newer definition over prevalent materialism definitions are discussed.

#### 4.1. A priori conceptualization

Mannion and Brannick (1995) noted, “[m]aterialism, you see, has had rather a bad press” (p. 3). Similarly, the negative connotation ascribed to it, in general, by the public has been noted by others (e.g., Swaggler, 1994). Ahuvia and Wong (1995) mentioned labeling someone as a materialist is no compliment. Consistently, a priori negative conceptualizations of materialism are conceived by academic scholars. Such negative conceptualization is normal, since materialism research chiefly falls under the purview of social sciences, dominated by the Standard Social Science Model (SSSM, for explanation, see Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). One of the consequences of SSSM in social sciences is that cultural accounts are considered the most important descriptors of psychological phenomena at an individual level (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). In other words, on a cultural level, materialism is considered unfavorable; therefore, it is unfavorable at an individual level.

However, scholars have raised their own doubts regarding materialism and its widespread a priori conceptualization in the academia, which might have several negative theoretical and practical implications. Shrum et al. (2012) noted a negative conceptualization of materialism will undermine the possibilities to understand the ways in which materialistic pursuits may have positive consequences for consumers. Larsen et al. (1999) commented not only about negative conceptualizations of materialism, but also noted that several of the existing measures contain items associated with negative emotions. As mentioned earlier, the concept of materialism is widely studied in happiness research. It has been consistently demonstrated that materialism is negatively related to life satisfaction and happiness (e.g., Wright and Larsen, 1993). Such findings may be confounded (Larsen et al., 1999). They alluded to the possibility that negative conceptualizations of materialism, used for the development of materialism scales that associate materialism with experience of bad emotions, may be responsible for such erroneous findings (e.g., see Carver and Baird, 1998; Srivastava et al., 2001).

#### 4.2. Oversimplification

Materialism is a complex phenomenon, which arises due to the interplay between individual and socio-cultural aspects. Considering materialism as a function of an individual’s collective personality traits (Belk, 1985), evolutionary traits (Scott, 2009), or personal values (Richins and Dawson, 1992) is oversimplified (Srivastava et al., 2001). Kasser and Sheldon (2000) noted that materialism is a behavior. According to Richins and Dawson (1992), materialism is a function of an individual’s personal values. However, it has been noted the influence of personal values on an individual’s behavior is at best modest; more specifically, they do not predict specific consumption behavior (Baumgarter and Pieters, 2008). Similarly, it has been noted that personality traits ability to predict behavior is limited (Monson et al., 1982). Likewise, in consumption contexts, personality-behavior relationships have not been empirically determined (Lastovicka and Joachimsthaler, 1988).



#### 4.3. Social desirability

Due to the prevalent negative notion related to materialism, it has been labeled as a dark side variable (Mick, 1996). Consequently, materialism measurements are susceptible to socially desirable responding. Socially desirable responding refers to the tendency for individuals to present themselves favorably in line with current cultural norms when responding to researchers' questions (ibidem). He successfully demonstrated that Richin and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale is a candidate for socially desirable responding. For example, after controlling for socially desirable responding, the statistically negative relationship between materialism and self-esteem disappeared.

#### 4.4. Possession centrality

A materialist is an individual who places *importance* on worldly possessions (Belk, 1985), possessions (Richins and Dawson, 1992) or extrinsic goals such as money and fame (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Holt (1995) argued that labeling an individual as a materialist, based on the importance they place on possessions, is too broad. In other words, he proposed that the purpose rather than the importance determines whether an individual is materialistic or not. Likewise, Srivastava et al. (2001, p. 959) noted that "[the] 'why' behind the goal, rather than the goal itself" determines a materialist. They found that the nature of the motives (e.g., positive motives [security] vs. negative motives [social comparison]) underlying the pursuit of money determined whether materialism was positively or negatively related to happiness.

#### 4.5. Materialism: redefined

Based on the discussions in the preceding sections, it is evident that the concept of materialism needs a new conceptualization. This sentiment has been echoed by various scholars. One particular newer materialism conceptualization proposed by Shrum et al. (2012) has the potential to overcome the existing drawbacks. At the broadest level, this conceptualization has some advantages. They are: (1) no a priori expectations and (2) integration of existing materialism conceptualizations (Shrum et al., 2012). They conceptualized materialism as, "*the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences, or relationships that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic value.*" The following paragraphs illustrate some of the advantages related to Shrum et al.'s (2012) materialism conceptualization.

### 4.5.1. Acquisition

Acquisition refers to an asset or object bought or obtained (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012). Consequently, according to the definition, an act of acquisition refers not only to buying contexts, but also to acquisition through gifts, inheritance, and other non-purchase means (Shrum et al., 2012). Furthermore, materialism entails not only acquisition, but also its use. This distinction is important. By focusing only on acquisition, the definition risks equating materialism with other concepts. For example, compulsive buying and hoarding are related to acquisition of possessions (Frost et al., 2009). Furthermore, Frost et al. (1995) found hoarders are fixated with acquisition of possession, but seldom use them.

### 4.5.2. Targets of acquisition

In the traditional approach, materialism refers to possessions, which are tangible objects (e.g., Iyer, 2011). However, such an assumption is extremely restrictive. Possession has been used to label tangible (e.g., material possessions) and intangible objects (e.g., experiential possessions, Lovelock, 1983). Also, Kotler and Levy (1969) noted in the context of marketing, product refers to physical product (i.e., tangible goods; e.g., clothes) or services (i.e., intangible offerings; e.g., tours). Furthermore, Bourdieu (2008) mentioned relationships (e.g., friendships) are possessions (social capital). Therefore, in the materialism conceptualization, the targets of acquisitions include material, experiential, and relationship possessions (Shrum et al., 2012).

### 4.5.3. Desirable symbolic value

The implicit assumption in the existing materialism conceptualization is individuals engage in materialistic behavior to attain happiness through acquisition of possessions (e.g., Richins and Dawson, 1992). Such an assumption is consistent with the Aristotelian view, which states “*happiness is the whole aim and end of human existence*” (Ahuvia, 2008, p. 493). However, several scholars argued against such an assumption. Ahuvia (2008, p. 502) noted, “*We have not evolved to be happy...*” On the other hand, it has been noted that possessions have symbolic value, which can provide desirable outcomes such as enjoyment, meaning, and continuity in one’s life and family (Belk, 1988). Furthermore, possession acquisition entails other advantages, such as a desire for positive, close, and reciprocal social relationships (Ahuvia, 2008). Therefore, in the materialism conceptualization, an individual’s acquisition of possessions is motivated to acquire a desirable symbolic value – be it power, friendship, or happiness.

#### *4.5.4. The self*

The most important feature of Shrum et al.'s (2012) materialism conceptualization is the integration of the concept of *self* with materialism. The self refers to a sense of whom and what one is, which has been suggested to be an organizing construct through which an individual's everyday activities could be understood (Kleine et al., 1993). The importance of the self in the context of materialism (and possessions) has been noted by several scholars. For example, Schroeder (1992) maintained an individual engages in materialistic activities to define, construct, and maintain one's self. Richins and Dawson (1992) and Micken and Roberts (1999) proposed the materialism conceptualization should be broadened. They noted one such solution is inclusion of the concept of self in materialism. In summary, Shrum et al.'s (2012) materialism conceptualization has several advantages. The conceptualization is broader in scope, which builds on existing materialism conceptualizations.

### **5. Conclusions**

In sum, materialism is an important concept, which is of interest to academicians, policy-makers, and market researchers. To this end, the purpose of the article was to review materialism literature in consumer behavior and marketing. Although, materialism research has greatly furthered our understanding of human behavior, nevertheless, drawbacks related to existing conceptualizations and measurement scales have been noted. Consequently, a newer conceptualization of materialism proposed by Shrum et al. (2012) was discussed. Furthermore, the advantages related to the newer conceptualization were mentioned. Future research should focus on materialism measurement scale consistent with the newer definition. Also, future research should explore potential antecedents, underlying processes, and consequences of materialism from the re-conceptualized materialism definition perspective (Shrum et al., 2012).

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### About the author

**Manchiraju SRIKANT** is a PhD candidate at Iowa State University. Broadly speaking, his research interests are related to marketing and psychology. He can be contacted at [srikant@iastate.edu](mailto:srikant@iastate.edu).